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Loyalty to our Church

A SERMON

Preached in the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, on Sunday,
November 4th, 1888,

BY

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PHILADELPHIA
BICKING PRINT, 1 SOUTH TENTH STREET
1888

LOYALTY TO OUR CHURCH.

MATTH. VII: 21—"By their fruits ye shall know them."

IN the tiniest dew-drop the great sky is mirrored: in the most tenuous sun-beam the qualities of light may be studied: through the smallest rift in the dyke, the great river may begin to drain away!

So in very small practical questions, great principles may be illustrated; important tendencies, good or ill, may manifest themselves.

Such a small, practical question arose lately, and was very candidly submitted to my judgment by some of our active young people. In outward form it amounted only to so much as this—the presence or absence of a single preposition on a document they were issuing. But underneath was really an important question, which they might very well consider; about which they might not unreasonably differ: one which, in fact, may be said to be open for us all; which, just at this time, society has pretty widely open.

In its local form, among us, it was only—should an excellent work of charity, which our young friends are doing, be regarded as organically related to the Church? Does truth require that relation to be recognized? Does expediency recommend it to be maintained? or does truth permit, or expediency advise, the maintenance of a distinction between the charitable organizations and the religious organization? Would the charity be more genuine, stronger in internal vigor and safer before the world if it should carefully distinguish itself from the Church?—or is it to be regarded

as a natural outcome of the active principles organized in and which give vitality to the Church? In a word, is this excellent work *of the Church*, or is it only carried on *in the Church building*?

The facts are, of course, patent. The idea in its original form, arose, simultaneously in the minds of several members of the Church. Let me please myself, and show my sympathy in the matter, by saying that it had arisen in my own mind before the Church began to be built—the idea that as a Church we ought to do something to counteract the presence of the grogshop then over the way, by providing a place where those who frequented it might, if they chose, spend their evenings less harmfully.

When it occurred to those young ladies it was promptly realized. By your permission the charity was welcomed into our building. The warmest response met it from you all. The funds needed were liberally provided, chiefly by you. Later, its increasing dimensions demanding more space, your beautiful Chapel was granted, in part, for its use—and it speedily, with your tacit consent, occupied the remainder, at the cost of considerable sacrifice of our convenience as a working religious body. But all this has been welcomed, for I think nothing was ever done among us, which touched so strikingly the sympathies of all.

Yet no ecclesiastical or sectarian purpose has been allowed to enter into it. No religious teaching has been permitted, no religious books admitted into its library, lest its kind purpose should be defeated by sectarian jealousy and distrust. In the spirit that has governed its workings it has been singularly expressive of Unitarian principles.

This is but one of our charities, though its character and history are especially interesting. They have all arisen in the benevolent impulses of our people and are fostered by those impulses, and by the conscientious principles our people cherish in respect to our obliga-

tions to those around us,—especially those of our neighbors who are less fortunate than ourselves.

And let us by no means be so ungenerous as to omit to say the same of the countless charities maintained and conducted by members of all the Churches about us. They all depend on and express the benevolent impulses and principles which live in the hearts of those people.

Now, then, let us enquire:—Do these impulses and principles arise and live in the hearts of ourselves and our brethren *independently* of our relations to the Church? or are they a *consequence* of our training in the Church? Do they, or do they not, express what we feel because we have been educated under the influences and the specific teachings of the Church? Are they, or are they not, the natural fruit of what the Church seeks to do in us? of what this Church peculiarly seeks to do in and for its members?

To ask these questions appears to be to answer them. These *are* the very fruits which the Church, certainly our Church, looks for in its members. They are the characteristic things which Jesus, the Head of the Church, unvaryingly and frequently demanded of his disciples. Unless they brought forth such fruits they could not be, he declared, his disciples. We are prompted to them, because we have, measurably, responded to his incitements, which have been forever renewed and reiterated by the voice of the Church. They become a natural part of the Church. We expect to do them and we expect every church to do them. Every church *does* them. Every church always has done them, more or less. In this generation, as almost never before, the whole Church is busy, is alive, with charitable activities.

So it was in the beginning. At the very outset, the Church devoted itself to the care of its needy members. So hardly did this press on the time and strength of the leading Apostles, that it was necessary to ap-

point special persons to relieve them of the burthen, that their peculiar work of preaching might not be defeated. As fast as St. Paul organized churches in Asia, Greece and elsewhere, he arranged, also, a general system of charity, for the relief of indigent Christians. The wealth of the great city churches was poured out, through regular channels, for the comfort of distant and struggling congregations.

In a word, make all the deductions you are obliged to, (and they are serious ones,) it remains true that the rise of Christianity and its organization in the Church marked—it is hardly too much to say—the entrance into the world of the principle of benevolence as an organized and efficient social principle. Jesus and the Apostles made love the essential principle of religion. Jesus saw love in Deity; he saw that it was the deepest, most essential principle in humanity. The Church was organized as a brotherhood, a family. It has never quite lost that characteristic quality.

Unhappily, by its exposure to metaphysical influences, which soon reached it, another element of Christianity was grossly exaggerated in importance—I mean its doctrinal element. In the teachings of Jesus, the element of metaphysic was almost non-existent. His theology was as simple, as broad, as practical as could well be conceived. “God is our Father,” is about all there was of it. Add “Man is our brother” and you have compendiously his religious system. The two great Commandments contain all of both.

Without doubt, his own speculations about himself gave some countenance to the elaborate speculations about him which that intrusion of Greek metaphysic so disastrously developed, and doctrine became, indeed, the most prominent thing, the essential thing, in actual Christianity—with unhappy consequences to truth, and often to the spirit of benevolence, as well as to morality.

But benevolence, love, brotherhood, and charity

have never been absent. They have always been integral in the work and the spirit of the Church. Ninety-nine one-hundredths of the charitable work of Christian countries has been done under the immediate prompting of the Church;—almost all of it in the name of the Church;—*all of it* as the fruit of principles which, whether she has been altogether loyal to them or not, at every moment she has always maintained, both abstractly and practically. From Antioch to San Francisco, in Egypt and Iceland, on the Danube and on the La Plata, works and institutions of charity have sprung up congenially in the pathway of the Church, and from the seed she has sown.

As a matter of fact, then, as a matter of history, there is no room for question that that small preposition, of which I spoke, is fully in place between by far the greatest part of our charities and the name of the Church. She planted them—her fertile soil produced them, *They are "of" her.*

And this is strictly true, in the case of our own charities and our Church. They exist *because we are a church.* We have been led to organize them through our being related to each other as a church. Of course, we might have organized them, even if we had never been a church—(though it is little likely that we should,) But the simple fact is, that they have grown up, they have been made possible, because we, and our predecessors have been constituted into a church. Our Church strictly and fully deserves the credit of them.

But, after all, the real question which our young friends have raised, is not yet settled. Their doubt is not only an honest one;—when analyzed and stated carefully, it is a rational and important one.

I think this would be a fair statement of it:—granting that our works of charity are fruits of our church life, ought this relation of them to the Church, especially their particular relation to this Church, to be

emphasized, in our thought, in our attitude, in our manner of conducting them.

In a word, is it best, under the circumstances, especially, of our Protestant Church, broken into sects innumerable, to mark sharply the connection of our practical benevolent activities with the Church and with our several churches?

Now, this question I answer and I think you will all answer, emphatically, no. One of the greatest evils of the past has been *ecclesiasticism*. Ecclesiasticism makes the Church an end in itself, instead of a means to religion, and so appropriates to its own service forces which should be devoted only to religion. It has often been, and will always be, a serious foe to religion; substituting another loyalty for that which we owe to truth alone, and distorting men's ideas of the relation of religion to life. Too much, in the past, the Church has had a *peculiar* life, apart from the world, apart from the ordinary social and personal life of men. A great necessity is to merge the religious life of men in their daily, practical lives—so that religion shall not be a thing apart from business, domesticity, pleasure, but associated with all and pervading all. We do *not* want to do our charitable work *merely as church-members*, for then it will be artificial, formal. It will be sure to have a taint of selfishness in it. We want to do it as men and women—as a part of the usual characteristic life of good men and women. The ideal we all ought to look forward to is that state of things when Church and world shall be one: when human society shall be one family, pervaded by the religious spirit, by reverence for God, love for man, love for all that is good and true and right, and dedicated, no longer to individual self-interest, but to the general good. Jesus called this ideal the Kingdom of Heaven—the reign of God. When it is come, we shall still want the Church as the instrumentality of common worship, as the nurse of devotional feeling, the educator of the

moral nature. But we shall cease altogether to distinguish what we do in our relation to her as a *peculiar* thing. We shall be stimulated to love God and man by her services and her associations, but we shall go out and do good *as men*, because that is what our whole lives are for.

And especially, as a more immediate matter, in the presence of the pervasive sectarianism which so disfigures and weakens Christianity, we do not want to emphasize the distinctions among Christians by much insistence on our several Church relations. We do *not* want to label our Christian activity with our denominational name too nicely, or too profusely, as if to mark the distinction between us and our neighbors. We want to do the good to which our Church calls us, to which her services incite us, and let it go for what it is worth. We can hardly do a better work for society than by setting an example of a people earnestly devoted to their church as a practical instrumentality of the religious life, but wholly superior to the mean, selfish spirit of sect, and to mere church pride. The bane of Christianity is the spirit of sect, to which the false importance, she was led to attach to beliefs, *i. e.*, to men's *opinions about* divine things,—gave rise. For the sake of the spirit of love which is the essence of true Christianity—for the sake of practical efficiency in good works, we want to use every opportunity to *unite* the members of the different sects in religious work—so that their hearts may be drawn together, and more and more the true spirit of religion be made manifest in them. The tendency in this direction is one of the most cheering signs of our modern time. And no influence has actually done more, as you all know, to bring the scattered fragments of the Church together, than the multifold philanthropic activities into which our generation has been led

As a practical matter, I would point out what I think and what you may have noted to be the actual process

which, in respect to particular charities, had better take place, and which the influence of the times, the time-spirit, tends to promote.

The convenience of our practical association in the Church, of the acquaintance it fosters, of the mere edifices which our congregations severally possess, makes our churches favorable *starting-places* for particular charities. They can there be initiated, tested on a small scale, their principles and methods determined in a measure. Then, if they prove to be practical and useful, they may outgrow the church where they were born, gather to themselves the forces of other churches, presently, perhaps, be adopted as a part of the general charitable or educational work of the community.

This, as you know, has already been the case with some charities—such as evening schools, sewing-schools, and others. The Church began them, society has taken them up; and they are even incorporated into our legal provisions for public education. I hope that, somehow, the success of our “Evening Home,” its lessons of simple friendliness as the key to dealing with the less fortunate classes, may at length lead to the provision all through this city, and other cities, of pleasant places of refuge and amusement for poor, friendless, exposed men and boys—so long as there remain such classes,—such anomalous classes,—in our Christian communities. At present, as I have often said, the liquor saloons and the low theatres, are the only places that offer their ready hospitality to the forlorn, unclean and degraded youth and men of our streets. If having happily closed some five or six thousand of the grog-shops of this city, we have thus turned their often homeless frequenters out upon the sidewalks, we ought the more actively to labor to provide them some other places where they may, if they will, have warmth, light and a chair. I assure you, my friends, glad as it made my heart to see the new walls of this fine edifice begin to rise, it

was with a pain almost equal that I saw the walls of that old church of ours falling piecemeal to the ground, and thought what a home we might have made of that commodious building, with its pretty yard, for the poor men and women and youth of that neighborhood! It was too much even to suggest at that time—and yet I wonder, if we had all had the spirit of Jesus in a full measure, whether it might not have been possible! The shade of that “People’s Club,” which might have been, often rises upon me as I pass the ancient site!

But let me return: I have said, let us do nothing that we do in a sectarian or in an ecclesiastical spirit. Let us enclose the works of benevolence which Providence may warm our hearts to do within no narrow paling of our own. Let us not be anxious to *parade* the excellences of the religious movement in which we share.

And yet,—let us not go to an opposite extreme. Remember this, which is a fact:—with all her faults, the Christian Church is still, above all others, the saving instrumentality in modern society. In her, the forces of religion and morality are organized effectively. And to-day, especially, she is full of the stir of a new life and hope, undetected by many, yet I believe real and growing, out of which even her full purification and regeneration may come. There was never a time *less* opportune for the lover of his kind to turn away from her than now, when the spirit of the Lord is moving upon her to give her *liberty*.

Of ourselves it is true that we have never had too much, but almost always too little, of the spirit of loyalty to that branch of the Church to which we belong. A superficial apprehension of the principle of individualism, a dislike of outward exercises, which has been partly a matter of principle, and quite as much a matter of moral indolence, have often made us lukewarm and irregular in our support of her. We have

often been wanting in a generous loyalty which was her due, and which should have lived in us to make her strong. The state of mind of some of our people, in this respect, is a complete puzzle. It is patriotism inverted.

I am sure that such a sentiment, or want of sentiment, is a vice. It can only exist through want of just appreciation of what our Unitarian Church actually is, and still more, of what she is capable.

Consider, first, what we have in the Church at large. What is the Church? Broadly described, it is "society organizing itself in the interest of the religious idea." It is the people uniting, seriously and willingly, to receive and to carry out the suggestions of religion, morality and philanthropy. It brings them together, groups them in bodies manageable in numbers, largely homogenous, and so connected as easily to transmit influences and suggestions from one to the other. Their voluntary attitude is that of reciprocity towards all theoretical and practical suggestions in religion, morals and philanthropy.

What a wonderful advantage to truth and humanity it is to have all this organization already effected! Suppose it did not exist, and you were a prophet and had a true thought, an earnest philanthropic impulse which you wanted to spread abroad and make effective, how helpless, comparatively, you would be in respect to getting the people together, and organizing them to carry it out! Now, the work is half done for you.

But if the members of any other branch of the Church should be, for all that she is and might be, loyal and faithful to her, we, instead of being less, may well be far more so. Not only may ours be to us all that any other is to its members, but it is always this beside. Unless we are all wrong; we stand peculiarly for the principles which might regenerate the whole; which, already stirring in the bosom of the Church, *will* one day regenerate her and set free all the forces

of religion, morality, and love to work through her mightily for men's welfare. In other words, we stand for the "organization of society in the interest of religion" according to the principle, not of doctrinalism and mental subserviency, but of that intellectual and moral freedom which is the law of our nature; for the *free* development in men of the religious principle,—which is the only *true* development. We stand to urge on society the duty and the safety of letting God's truth make its way in its own power, unhindered by men's creeds and other methods of coercion. We have not yet much outward strength. We are but a handful in the great Christian world. Surely we ought to stand by each other and do all we can to strengthen each other's hands! If one does not believe in freedom, it is another matter—if he does not believe in religion, that is another matter; to him I am not speaking. But if you do believe in the characteristic principle for which your Church stands, give her your hearty support, not that half-hearted negative patronage which chills her friends, and encourages the distrust and perhaps the contempt of those who know little or nothing of her.

Even in a matter like that which has led me to these remarks, your Church pleads with you for your unselfish loyalty, because she actually realizes that which some progressive souls who hesitate in a close alliance with her, have caught a ray of and wish to secure: it is, I take it, *disinterestedness* in the religious, moral and philanthropic work we do for our fellows. The Church at large has often, and too justly, excited the distrust of men, because, included in her kindly wish to benefit them, she has had the purpose of *moulding* them. Too often she would *not* do the benevolent thing unless they would also submit to the sectarian thing. Indeed, so characteristic has this church-selfishness been of her, that many cannot believe a church *can* be disinterested. They can hardly

believe we can gather in even these street boys, give them our best room, watch them, feed them, teach them a little, without having the hidden purpose of proselyting them, making Unitarians of them,—at least, of sowing some secret seed of our thought which may some day, spring up and vex those who are in authority over their religious education. Few can believe that we can invite persons to associate in the habitual services of the Church with no purpose to coerce or manipulate their thought; that we, sincerely and unreservedly trust everything to the power of truth, and whatever we think ourselves, think none the worse of another for holding a different opinion, but actually and unreservedly respect him in doing so and respect his right to do so.

But *you know that we do* all this. You *know* that we have no selfish purpose, either towards the beneficiaries of our charity, or those who share in our worship. *As an organization* we stand for religion; we stand for God, for the spiritual life, for the moral law. We bear *as an organization* our testimony to these. But we do not suggest to any person whatsoever to accept even these our fundamental ideas, except it be that the light of truth falling on his mind (falling, it may be, through the lens we offer him—through what he sees in us, and in our thought—yet falling freely,) shows him that our thoughts are true.

All this *you know*—you who have long known our Church. People at large do *not* know it. It is so strange to them that they can hardly believe it.

Indeed it *is* a great thing we stand to do! To teach the Christian world *unselfishness* is to do one of the greatest services which can be done, to truth and to humanity. It is to take a millstone off its neck!

But this service we have striven and are striving to do. And I say to the lover of truth, of freedom, of his kind, the organization which tries to do this work has a right to his sympathy, it has a claim on his loyalty.

Your attitude towards your church ought not to be that chilly indifference which she sometimes suffers under, but a warm and cordial devotion, which is resolved to do all it can to make her strong, to make the world understand her spirit and her aim, to win its confidence and regard for her, that the principles she cherishes may make their beneficent way, unimpeded by prejudice and ignorant hostility.

I do not claim that the Unitarian Church *realizes* all she might and ought to be. But this is certainly true—we have in her an admirable ideal of what a Church should be; of the right relations of those who would work together for truth and humanity. Religion, permeated by morality and philanthropy, and wholly free from doctrinal exclusiveness, sectarian jealousy and church pride—these are its leading features.

And especially, the Unitarian Church stands for that kind of religion which *issues in life*. She values comparatively little, as I have shown, that mere intellectual apprehension of truth which men call “belief” and of which the Church at large has made and still makes so much. We know that belief is important, but we hold that it is not of supreme importance. *It is not of that kind of importance which the Church has attached to it.* We demand the proofs of religion, not in the easy assent to doctrine, but in life and character. We demand uprightness, we demand active service, we demand *love*. And therefore such works of love as helping the old women you gather about you weekly, teaching those little girls lessons in domestic art and order, opening your doors to that multitude of poor, ragged, untidy boys, that they may be warm, may taste a little of our own comfort, may be happy for an hour,—all this is *characteristic of our Church*—it is OF our Church in the truest and strictest sense. *All this is an integral part of the ideal we are trying to realize.*

And so I say—shall we not join hands and labor cordially, labor more earnestly than we have hitherto

done, to realize this ideal? Shall we not stand by each other and by our Church in *developing* it? Not that we may make her *strong*, but that we make her *useful*; not that we may make her outwardly great, but that through her we may better serve our age; that we may find out, more and more, what a true Church ought to be; that we may purify and elevate our own idea of it and purpose in it?

I do not hesitate, my friends, to express my own deliberate conviction—and I believe I am able to say this in sincere disinterestedness,—that, in the actual condition of our own community, we can hardly do for society, in respect to religion, morals and philanthropy, any service more genuine, or much more direct, than to sustain amply *such a Church as ours aims to be*.